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THE
BIBLE SERMON

PREACHED AT
SAINT IVES'S CHURCH,
IN
HUNTINGDONSHIRE,

ON
WHITSUN-TUESDAY, JUNE 10, 1783.

By CHARLES DICKENS, LL.D.

C A M B R I D G E :

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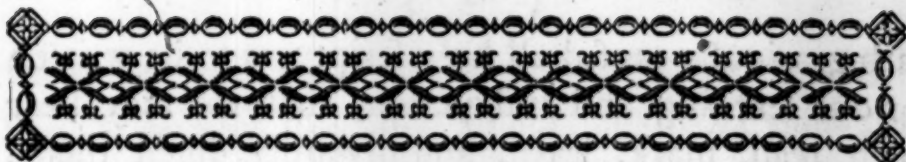
And sold by the CHURCHWARDENS and OVERSEERS,
To buy Bread, at this dear Season, for the Benefit of the poorer Hearers.

(Price ONE SHILLING.)

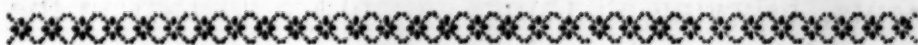
BIBLE 2 R M O N



BY CHARLES DICKENS, II



A
S E R M O N.



A C T S, xvii. 11.

THESE WERE MORE NOBLE THAN THOSE IN THESSALONICA, IN THAT THEY RECEIVED THE WORD WITH ALL READINESS OF MIND, AND SEARCHED THE SCRIPTURES DAILY, WHETHER THOSE THINGS WERE SO.

Dearly beloved Brethren,

THIS is the third, and probably, the last opportunity I may evermore have, of preaching to you upon the present occasion: when, on this day annually, the dye is cast for Bibles, upon the table; but the whole disposing thereof, is of the Lord, who

hath graciously caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning and instruction, that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; being able, through Christ, to make us wise unto salvation: whilst, if we are hearers only, and not doers of the word, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; neither shall we die the death of the righteous, nor have our last end like his: since, if we would enter into life, we must keep the commandments, believing all things which are written in the law and the prophets; besides being ready to give an answer to every one that asketh us a reason of the hope that is in us christians, from the New Testament; which we shall be only able to do by imitating these persons in the text; who are said to be more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

It shall be the business therefore of the following discourse to shew, and convince you, I trust, (being no longer a young, but senior divine of almost forty years standing) that, in all our enquiries concerning any matters of a religious sort, that have their rise from revelation, the scriptures are the best, if not the only rule we should have recourse to: that it is the duty,

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as well as best privilege of all reasonable dependent beings, to look into their Bibles, as the Bereans did; to be assured of the words of eternal life; to see, and learn what the will of the Lord is, that they might obey it, practise it, fulfil it; adding moreover finally, and confessing that, however we be Christ's ambassadors to beseech you to be reconciled, we are but as other men are; neither do we commend ourselves, who are not sufficient to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; neither do we preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants, for Jesus' sake.

Now, in regard to my first proposition, it seems to me so very evident, that one would wonder how any should think of making enquiry after the revealed will of God any where else, than in those very writings that we must all allow to be of divine authority; and, if we are once assured not to doubt, that there is a book, which containeth the whole will of God; that containeth all things necessary to salvation (commonly called the Holy Bible) it is certainly that, and that only, which we must at last, have recourse to, in order to know the divine will, what it is the Lord our God requireth of us:

AND, wheresoever else we find any thing touching our duty to the Almighty, to our neighbours, and ourselves, it must all finally be tried, and examined by that, if it be true, or no.

WE may indeed, and often do use helps for our better understanding the holy scriptures; but still, we are not to rely so far upon them, upon any man's, or number of men's great understanding, that we judge superior to our own, as to think we cannot be mistaken, if we receive whatsoever they declare to us concerning the laws and will of heaven.

BUT, as the scriptures are the only infallible rule, which we must at last have recourse to in all religious enquiries, (if they be once owned to contain all the particulars God Almighty requireth of us in order to future happiness) it then becometh us to search the scriptures ourselves, without wholly depending upon the directions of others, (even your own lawful teachers) in the great affair of eternal salvation.

WHEN, for any christian to give up himself so far to be governed by any now a-days, as to take that for the law and will of God, which they declare to be so, is, as far as in any such christian lies, investing all such teachers

teachers and instructors with that power, which Almighty God first gave to those persons only, whom he sent into the world on purpose to make his will known; to preach it, to publish it, to declare it; because to give any one an absolute power to interpret written law, is, in reality, to make such the very law-givers:

AND, though with respect to human laws, we may submit to a determination directly contrary to the plain intention of the law, (as has been sometimes done) yet the case is much otherwise with respect to the laws of divine appointment, whose terms of acceptance are immutable, are already fixed, and declared of those to the world, that were first commissioned by God himself:

AND therefore, every one of you, (my brethren) every one for himself, ought to consult those writings contained in the scriptures, that are able to make you wise unto salvation: but no man may deliver his brother, or make an atonement unto God for him.

WERE it sufficient in this matter of so infinite concern to you, to depend wholly upon others, for what they teach concerning the will of God; were any, up-
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on the account of the ordinary ministers of the gospel, excused from taking the measures of their duty from those, who were inspired by God himself: the consequence would be that the conditions of salvation would be as different, as the different ages and countries men live in: where there would be some of Paul, some of Apollos, some of Cephas, some one thing, some another; neither would it then concern the laity, howmuchsoever their teachers should make void the will of God.

It would not affect them in any sort, whatsoever they suffered to be imposed upon them; they would then be obliged to follow their pastors wheresoever they should lead them; and take their doctrines, the commandments of men, for the real conditions of acceptance with God, howsoever different from his original declarations.

WHILST, it is to be feared, if the people upon any pretence whatsoever, do neglect to learn the terms of happiness from thence, where only, they are certainly to be found, where they will continue always the same; and, if by that neglect, they suffer themselves to be led away from their duty into any important error, or breach of it, it will be charged upon them as a wilful,

wilful, and intended transgression; so that, they will no more be excusable in the court of heaven, than the generality of the Jews were in rejecting our Saviour, because none of the rulers, or of the Pharisees believed on him.

I MAY venture to add further, I think, that though the people should not be led into any important error by depending wholly upon others, or their own ordinary teachers and instructors, yet they would not, I will suppose, be quite blameless for so doing; not only because they pay that submission to fallible men, (as we all are) which is due to those only, who are conducted, as the apostles were, by God's infallible spirit: but likewise, because in all religious matters, men ought to act like reasonable creatures: to prove all things; to hold fast to that which is good; and not to act upon such a principle, as makes it meer chance, whether they are directed right or wrong.

SUCH indeed, who can give no better account of their religion, of the reason of the hope that is in them, than that they follow their teacher and adviser in the way of godliness, into less seemly places than the church, as many do; and take upon trust whatsoever he tells them is the will of God; may possibly, not

not be deceived as to the terms, the conditions of happiness; but will yet undoubtedly, be prepared to be tossed to and fro' with every wind of doctrine; and must, to act consistently with themselves, be as ready to receive that, for the will of God, which is not, as that which is: though, when men have done all they can; and, we should all strive to enter in at the strait gate, through knowledge and practice of the will of God: when we have ourselves examined those writings which undoubtedly contain it: when we have made use of that measure of understanding given us, and intrusted with us, of our heavenly Father: it is then, and only then, that we have any of us acquitted ourselves like reasonable creatures, that may have any grounds to hope that we shall be saved, or, that our errors will not be charged upon us to our ruin, and final destruction.

WHILST, if men decline that method of knowing God's will, which can only with any safety be depended upon, and which all christians ought to have recourse to: if instead of consulting, reading, marking, and learning those writings, which were transmitted down to them for their improvement, and instruction: to teach them their duty in their several capacities; they should wholly depend upon others: even, though they

they should not be deceived, or misinformed what the will of the Lord is; yet this would not altogether excuse such behaviour.

AN implicit faith is never commendable; and it is always wrong, to put ourselves into such a method, as makes it a mere accident, whether we light upon right or wrong:

It is giving that credit to fallible men, which is due to God only; and, in such a case, we may be equally disposed for truth, or falsehood.

THE Bæans had not been deceived, if they had believed that Jesus was the Christ, purely because saint Paul told them so; but, because they were as sure, as they could be of any thing else, that they had a divine revelation, which foretold all the marks and characters of the Messias; (of that Child born unto us, that Son given, upon whose shoulder should be the government, as Isaiah saith: whose name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace; of whose body, of whose flesh, and of whose bones we are members, as of each other in particular;) they ought not to have received any, who pretended to make a

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further discovery of God's will to them, without examining, whether those marks and characters were verified in him, or not.

WITHOUT such examination, they might have been as liable to have taken any other person for the Son of God, as him, who really was so; and would, with as much reason, have been blamed, and condemned for their easy credulity, as the Beræans were by the apostle, applauded and commended for believing, upon rational conviction; daily searching the scriptures to be informed, whether those things were so.

THE case then, is the very same with all christians of the present times: when they are once assured, that our Saviour and his apostles have fully and unalterably laid down the terms of happiness, the conditions of salvation; and that, they are transmitted to them faithfully, in the safest manner: should they look for them any where else, but in those scriptures, that have the words of eternal life; to pin their faith upon others, and confide altogether in fallible men, like unto themselves: though they should not be misled perhaps, yet they would act upon a principle, that is indefensible; that will give every one an advantage against them, who shall lay in wait to deceive, and lead

lead captive their brethren: and their religion will not be the result, as it should be, of all rational, free enquiry; that alone must recommend every man to the favour, and sure acceptance of their Maker, Creator, and Protector, God Almighty: but, it is enough!

AND, because I am not willing to allow this head a greater share of the time present, than it needeth, or requireth, I come secondly, to enquire what is the proper business of us, who have taken upon ourselves the ministerial office; who are all ambassadors of Christ, and stewards of the manifold grace of God.

It cannot however, I think, be expected, nor is it at all necessary to enter into a long proof of our authority to preach the gospel, to administer the sacraments, and the like, which ye surely, will not dispute: but, what the subject particularly leads me to enquire after, is our business, as teachers and guides to you, the people, notwithstanding your right, as well as ours, to search the holy scriptures, to examine them, that ye may be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you.

AND, in order to this, I believe, it will be no offence even to mine own order, to say, that no man, by being in the ordinary way, set apart for God's service, does thereby become infallible; nor will it be denied, I think, that those he has the rule over, as teacher and pastor, are not obliged to follow him, if he doth not truly declare his Master's will; if he doth not preach unto them the words of eternal life; or, if he will not himself observe the divine commandments.

BUT some man will say, as saint Paul upon another occasion speaks, What then can be the business of the ordinary ministers of the gospel, or, to what purpose are they the guides and instructors of the people, if they are not infallible? and, if it will not be sufficient for the people to follow their declarations implicitly, without examining them by a superior criterion, will not their calling be useless, unless they are either supposed to be secure from all error, or, that it will not avail those, who are committed to their care, wholly to depend upon them?

THOU fool, (to use the said apostle's language,) can no other end of our institution be thought of? may we not without infallibility in ourselves, or an absolute

lute authority over our hearers, over the flock of Christ, remind men of their faults, to convince them of their errors, by applying the general rules in scripture, to particular cases, and explaining them to the people in the best manner we may be able? the salutary end of our appointment, the most necessary business of every teacher! and, whoever is found faithful herein, in thus honestly discharging his sacred office, shall be of very great use in promoting the honor of God, and the good of mankind; without either assuming that authority given to the apostles only, or without rendering the sacred function that now is, unnecessary; though we tell our hearers, that the sacred writings are the standard by which all our preaching must be tried, whether it be of God, or whether we speak of ourselves.

BUT, as we are set apart purely for the service of the Church, and are ordained to preach the gospel, (and should live of the gospel,) that we may be more at liberty to attend diligently on our ministry; and it may be presumed, we are for that reason, better acquainted than the generality of people are, or can be, with the language the holy scriptures were first written in; the customs they frequently refer to, and many other particulars necessary to the edification

tion of our hearers: so it is, we may suggest such reasons to them sometimes, they scarcely ever thought of; and lay before them the danger of their evil courses in such a lively and convincing manner, as to be the ordinary instruments, I trust, in the hand of God, to the salvation of the world.

Thus it is we may answer these, and many other useful ends of our institution and appointment, without putting out the eyes of the people, or forbidding them, as the Pontiffs do, to search the scriptures, whether those things we declare to them, be so, or not.

IN a word, what is recorded of Apollos? that, being mighty in the scriptures, he helped them much, which had believed; for he mightily convinced them, shewing by the scriptures, that Jesus was the Christ. The same may be done by us, the ordinary ministers of the gospel: we may, (and I trust, often do) convince the understanding, the sober understanding of our several willing hearers; may be helpful in enforcing and laying before them, every branch of their duty, without infallibility in ourselves, or supposing an incapacity in them, of examining, proving, and judging what the will of the Lord is: and what doth the
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Lord require of either hearers or preachers, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God?

LET that church then, which debars the people from consulting the scriptures, require them to learn the terms, the conditions of salvation, from herself; since, we do not lay claim to any privileges, which tend to deprive men of that measure of understanding in the way of godliness; of that knowledge, which is graciously afforded every one, through the scriptures, of becoming wise unto salvation.

WE shall always think men's faculties may be of use to them in distinguishing betwixt truth, and falsehood; and that, they can never be better employed, than when the enquiry is rationally made of accountable creatures, into the terms and conditions of eternal life.

WE own, that all things necessary to salvation, lie level to all, who have capacity enough to render themselves proper objects of reward and punishment, provided they do but make use of their reason, and all those helps which are put into their hands: we make no pretences to infallibility; no boast, that we cannot
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err; and, if we think we stand, we should take heed, lest we fall; though, we have long ago declared, have set to our seal, that the scripture contains all things necessary to salvation: so that, whatsoever is not read therein, or cannot be proved thereby, ought not to be required to be believed as an article of faith in any christian: and we have, all of us, long since acknowledged that, some churches have erred even in matters pertaining unto God; as, most undoubtedly, all may.

WE however, the ministers about holy things, promised at our entrance into God's vineyard, to prune it and dig it; to instruct the people committed to our charge, out of the scriptures; and to teach them nothing but what we are persuaded may be proved thereby; and we cannot act contrary to this solemn promise; to these repeated declarations, till we publicly retract them; till we own, that we subscribed we knew not what, without sufficient consideration.

AND, as we have still the same opinion of the excellency of our church, of our established national church, that we had when we first chose the ministerial office in it: though some have lately gone from it; (a Lindsey, a Jebb, and a Disney) so, consistently with ourselves, we wish that all, who are committed
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to our care, would diligently examine, each man for himself, whether we preach Jesus Christ, or ourselves:

AND, let all attend to our ministry with humble, teachable, and toward dispositions; as being set over them, to watch for them, by Christ himself, the great Shepherd and Bishop of our souls: let them have recourse especially, to his preaching! let them search the scriptures, to see and examine, if we make things easier, or harder, more, or fewer, than they really are; and let them look, whether out of ambition and avarice, we lay heavy burthens upon their shoulders, which they are not able to bear; or whether, for fear of offending, we sooth them in their vices, and gratify their itching ears.

Now, as we ourselves chose the sacred function, not for that reason only, because it is by law established, but because upon sincere, diligent enquiry, we were satisfied of its superior excellency above all other: so, we are willing, we are desirous that all of our communion, of this household of faith especially, would make the same search, would try, and examine into it, that they may be able to give a better account of the hope that is in them, as members of our communion,

munition, than this only; that, their teachers assure them, they are in the right way, that, they are not misled; and, that their fathers were not so, before them: or, what errors, what abuses must there needs be! what corruptions among us! but we hope, all of this family of christians, have a firmer ground work than this; a much better foundation to build upon:

WHILST, if there be any, who enter upon religion, as a matter of course only, and, who therefore, are as ignorant of the conditions of salvation, and of the nature of the christian religion, as if they had never heard of the name of Jesus Christ, the author of it: it must be owned, they are very improper judges of what their teachers recommend and declare to them, concerning his laws: yea, and are no judges at all.

BUT, however this may be, men's unconcernedness about the truth, does not lessen the obligations they are under to enquire after it; (for the truth shall make us free) nor does it shew that, it is not in their power to make a proper use of those books, that contain all truth, which alone, can make all men wise unto salvation; being written for the use and benefit of all people: all people are commanded to study them; and the

the command plainly sheweth, what they are capable of doing for all those, (old, or young,) that shall be found employed in the divine will.

To conclude: Therefore, let us never wilfully mislead our hearers; and let the people all strive that they may neither be misled, nor deceived: for then, we may trust finally, to give an account of our ministry with joy and comfort; and our flocks may be assured, either that their errors will be overlooked, or that their understanding in the way of godliness, will be much enlightened; that they shall be able to know of any doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether it be of men.

SEARCH then, I beseech you, one and all, for yourselves, the holy scriptures of God; read them, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that if ye believe not me, if ye believe not the gospel we preach, ye may see it with your eyes, besides hearing it with your ears, to be convinced of the truth of it: for herein will ye prove yourselves praiseworthy, meriting the justest commendation; to be likened to the Bereans of old time, whom the text declareth to have been more noble than those in Thessalonica.

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WHEREFORE, in one word, as well as a thousand, let me leave this necessary caution, especially with you, (my little flock,) to be stedfast, immoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; forasmuch as ye know, that your labour is not in vain in the Lord; who at the general resurrection in the last day, shall say unto you, Come, ye blessed children of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you, from the beginning of the world.

AND, the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ, our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you, and remain with you always! Amen.

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